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ACTFL Celebrates Its First 50 Years

By Pete Swanson

I am humbled by the forethought, dedication, and work that has taken place to advance our profession to where we are today. The teaching and learning of languages in the United States (US) has a rich history (see LaBue, 1960), and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has played an important role for 50 years. Chronicling the organization's work over the past half century in his book, *A History of ACTFL: A Review of Current Progress in Teaching Foreign Languages*, Terry (2016) noted that Kenneth W. Mildenerberger, the Director of the Division of College and University Assistance at the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, "lamented the lack of *private enterprise* in foreign language training and teaching (p. 1)" during a summer commencement speech delivered at Middlebury College in Vermont in 1963. Mildenerberger expressed concern because before the enactment of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958, leaders in the profession were proactive and had established the Foreign Language Program of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in 1952 using funds from the Rockefeller Foundation. The Program, according to Terry (2016), set the professional leadership in motion and promoted the Foreign Language in the Elementary School as a national issue. Individuals associated with the Program collected information about the critical nature of language instruction and promoted it widely starting with the general public and ultimately making the case to Congress—a genuine national advocacy campaign. Leaders in the Program examined the needs for modern foreign languages, developed policy, and began to establish a national voice for the importance of language teaching and learning. However, when funding ended the same year the NDEA took effect, so did the effort to keep foreign language study at the forefront of the educational policy, on which Mildenerberger commented during his commencement at Middlebury in 1963. He not only pointed out the impact on American education that the NDEA had had since its inception, he also noted that people in Washington DC were fearful that the private sector in our profession "will be uncritical and will, by silence, desert its proper role of policy leadership" (Terry, 2016, p. 1).

While it is uncertain if Mildenerberger's comments were the sparks that fueled later action, the MLA leadership took note and invited the Executive Committee of the National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Association to collaborate and co-found a new organization. During the MLA meeting on October 14, 1966, members of the Executive Council authorized the establishment of an organization to be called the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Mildenerberger, 1967a) as an individual-membership organization "in which all persons and groups interested in the quality of foreign language teaching might participate directly" (Terry, 2016, p. 3). The MLA Executive Council Guidelines for Organizing ACTFL stated that "ACTFL will seek to become a unifying focus for efforts to advance pedagogical and professional aspects of the teaching of all foreign languages at all levels" (Mildenerberger, 1967a, p. 5).

Now, as we just celebrated ACTFL's golden anniversary in Boston with more than 8,500 people in attendance, I feel it is important to recognize ACTFL's contributions since its inception. Thus, I contacted several ACTFL Past Presidents in a random selection process to solicit their opinions and thoughts regarding ACTFL's signature achievements in light of Mildenerberger's (1967a) hope regarding the creation of ACTFL—"ACTFL is now an empty vessel, waiting to be filled

with sound ideas, hard work, and progress. I pray that it will not turn out to be just a ceremonial association” (p. 173). Clearly, ACTFL turned out to be a powerhouse of innovation, collaboration, and leadership. Among ACTFL’s many achievements over the past 50 years, the past presidents listed the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking, Writing, Listening, and Reading, the development of the National Standards for Language Learning (now the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages), the development of the Oral Proficiency Interview, the Language Teacher of the Year program, Research Priorities, the national public advocacy campaign, the Year of Languages in 2005, ACTFL’s two official publications, *Foreign Language Annals* and *The Language Educator*, and the annual ACTFL Convention, which continues to be the largest language expo for language educators.

Beginning with the notion of focusing on learner proficiency, Dale L. Lange, ACTFL President in 1980, stated that he feels “the singularly most important [ACTFL] achievement took place in the early 1980s during a meeting of the many AATs, the MLA, and TESOL when ACTFL made the decision to take on the responsibility to support the concept of proficiency across the K-20 spectrum” (personal communication, September 14, 2016). Clearly, the proficiency movement has been a game changer. Leaders and people in the field began to look differently at teaching methodology as the paradigm began to shift from grammar-translation to a more communicative approach to language teaching and learning. Ray Clifford, ACTFL Past President in 1993 and 2008, agrees and added that the creation of the Proficiency Guidelines and then the establishment of a testing system that reliably teaches and applies those guidelines are among ACTFL’s most significant accomplishments. He noted that

the combination of curriculum-independent assessment criteria, professional development, and testing capabilities has added a professional context for teaching methods that was not previously available. Thirty years ago, the program for the ACTFL annual conference was dominated by what I would describe as a *battle of competing teaching methods*. Today we are able to see that those teaching methods are really teaching techniques, and we can discern how each technique aligns with learning activities that are appropriate at some stage of proficiency development (personal communication, September 22, 2016).

Today, ACTFL is a leader in the field of second language proficiency by developing quality, valid and reliable assessments for teachers [e.g., OPI] as well as for language learners. The new Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL) is unlike any other assessment. The AAPPL measures addresses the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages by using innovative technology in which test takers perform tasks (e.g., participating in a virtual video chat, creating wikis) in order to demonstrate language ability at a very affordable price.

In addition to moving to focus on language learner target language proficiency, Lange also noted that another important achievement happened about the same time (early 1980s) when ACTFL established a Washington Liaison Office. In his first President’s Message, Lange (1980) reported that ACTFL and the Modern Language Association (MLA) were going to establish a Liaison Office in Washington DC in cooperation with the Joint Committee for Languages (JNCL). The office was to hire a lobbyist who would work to inform the profession of language legislation

that had been proposed or introduced to Congress as well as work closely with professional organizations in order to support foreign language education on a national level. Today, lobbying remains important to ACTFL and to language professionals. A few years ago, ACTFL hired the Sheridan Group to represent language teaching and learning interests at the national level. Each year, ACTFL leadership joins individuals from JNCL-NCLIS to lobby on Capitol Hill during the congressional appropriations period in February to advocate on behalf of our profession. ACTFL Past President Mary Lynn Redmond in 2014 noted that ACTFL and the MLA were proactive by establishing a lobbying presence in the nation's capital. "Now, with the professional lobbyists working on behalf of the profession, ACTFL has another powerful voice promoting the teaching and learning of languages on a daily basis (personal communication, September 21, 2016).

Adding to the conversation about advocacy efforts, Marty Abbott, 2003 ACTFL President and current ACTFL Executive Director, added that "it is important to have a consistent and active presence on Capitol Hill" (personal communication, September 16, 2016). She noted that the national public advocacy campaign for the Year of Languages in 2005 was a huge success. Abbott stated that ACTFL has continued to grow as the national voice for the profession. "One of the best recent examples is the Language Teacher of the Year program. Each year an ACTFL committee selects the next Language Teacher of the Year among a highly qualified group of exceptionally talented teachers. This individual attends and speaks at each of the regional conferences as well as participating in the Language Advocacy Day activities on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. This year's Language Teacher of the Year, Dr. Ted Zarrow, has met with legislators from Massachusetts (e.g., Senator Elizabeth Warren) as well as with the US Secretary of Education, John B. King Jr., to advocate for our profession. Earlier this year, Zarrow was invited to the White House where President Obama recognized the National Teacher of the Year, Teachers of the Year from each state, and other distinguished educators from around the country.

In addition to the aforementioned achievements, ACTFL 2010 President Eileen Glisan mentioned that the Research Priorities initiative "firmly established research within ACTFL in a sustainable way" (personal communication, September 22, 2016). She noted that the project "made a profound impact in the field and was well-received by practitioners and researchers alike." As President-Elect, Glisan noted that she was hoping to bring research to the forefront of ACTFL's work. Thus, the Research Priority Taskforce was developed and leading experts in the field were asked to join the taskforce in order to identify critical research areas. Meetings took place and the first work to emerge from the taskforce were literature reviews in four areas that were published in a special issue of *Foreign Language Annals* in 2012. From those reviews, the first set of research areas were announced. As was the vision, Glisan noted that the Research Priorities created a link between research and practice and that the funded research "continues to allow for deeper discussions about research-based language teaching and learning". Originally, the research grants were funded originally by ACTFL, the National Federation of Modern Language Teachers' Association, and the *Modern Language Journal*. Presently, ACTFL solely supports the funding and the fifth phase of the initiative is now underway. Research from the initiative includes studies about the attainment of the oral proficiency standard (Brooks & Darhower, 2014), high-leverage teaching practices (e.g., Kearney, 2015), World Language edTPA (Hildebrandt & Swanson, 2014), communities of practice (J. Terantino), Chinese immersion (C. Lü), and content-based instruction (J. Martel) to name just a few projects.

Findings from many of the studies can be found in *Foreign Language Annals*, ACTFL's flagship journal. Originally when ACTFL was conceptualized, *The Modern Language Journal* was to be transferred to ACTFL as its official journal. According to Terry (2016), a deadline of June 30, 1967, was set for the vote by constituent members so that the Modern Language Journal could be legally transferred to ACTFL before September 1, 1967. However, the NFMLTA Executive Committee was unable to reach a satisfactory means for implementation of the transfer of *The Modern Language Journal* to ACTFL. Nevertheless, ACTFL published the first issue of Foreign Language Annals in October 1967 with Mildenerger as interim editor. In his editorial, he mentioned the 15-year struggle to improve and bolster the role of foreign language education in American education (Terry, 2016). Specifically, he wrote about his and other peoples' frustration over "the absence of a comprehensive social medium which could communicate regularly the unfolding chronicle of information which gives meaning to the concept of a profession of foreign language teachers" (Mildenerger, 1967b, p. 3.) He advocated in favor that every language teacher support the national association dedicated to the language taught as well as identify with "the profession of foreign language teaching, which ACTFL and *Foreign Language Annals* now seek to serve" (as cited in Terry, 2016, p. 7).

Today, the journal has a global reach where it is read by more than 12,500 members in 39 countries along with the latest ACTFL publication, *The Language Educator*. As 2015 ACTFL President Jacque Van Houten noted, "I have been impressed with *The Language Educator*. It has become widely popular for educators and professionals alike, the articles are timely and peer-reviewed" (personal communication, September 25, 2016). The Language Educator is designed for teachers at all levels regardless of language taught as a single, comprehensive source of news and information. The magazine is published four times annually, and now with ACTFL's new membership structure, members can receive both publications digitally or in print.

Overall, in my discussions with the past presidents, one theme continued to emerge, Collaboration. Helene Zimmer-Loew, ACTFL Charter Member and President in 1984, remarked that "for years ACTFL has served as a nexus for collaboration among the many foreign language organizations, whether it be on research or advocacy, for example" (personal communication, September 13, 2016). As ACTFL President, I agree wholeheartedly. From the development of the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages to the newly developed Can-Do Statements for Intercultural Communication (ACTFL, 2016) to the Leadership Initiative for Language Learning (LILL, 2016) to its annual convention, ACTFL has sought to collaborate with organizations on a variety of projects that focus on improving language teaching and learning, which serves as testimony that ACTFL has indeed "become a unifying focus for efforts to advance pedagogical and professional aspects of the teaching of all foreign languages at all levels" (Mildenerger, 1967a, p. 5).

It is clear that since its inception, ACTFL has achieved great success. However, much work remains. We all must become and remain fierce, proactive advocates for a stronger presence of language teaching and learning in the national curriculum. Advocacy starts with an individual and moves to the collective. In its first 50 years, ACTFL has made significant contributions to the profession. The national convention this year in Boston was tremendous with so many professionals in attendance from so many different countries. The energy was palpable. I invite you to Nashville next year for the 50th anniversary of the first ACTFL convention in order to continue to advance our profession.

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